DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 093 CS 212 810

AUTHOR Worley, Demetrice A.
TITLE Freedom within Boundaries: The Use of Structured and Loose Structured Poetry.
PUB DATE 26 Oct 90
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English (Springfield, IL, October 26-27, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; Creative Writing; Elementary Education; English Instruction; Middle Schools; *Poetry; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Childrens Writing; Poetry Workshops; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Often when teaching creative writing to grade school and middle school students, teachers encounter two problems: students state that they do not have anything to write about, or students keep their poetic voices quiet and imitate the examples that they are given. If students are encouraged to mentally create images of poetic forms and to write poetry within loose versions of the forms, they are more receptive to poetry. In addition, when students visualize the forms before they write, they have a sense of where they are going before they get there. In order for students to see poetry as living, breathing words which have a connection to them, educators need to give students examples chosen from the middle of the poetry spectrum. Students in the third through eighth grades respond best to quatrains and sonnets. The quatrain works well as an example to use to explain how stanzas can create a poem. If teachers explain to students that what goes on within the sonnet is as important as, or even more important than, its formal elements, they can encourage students to see that the message within the sonnet is what is most important. Seeing a visual representation of the poetic form allows students to visualize what a poem looks like; they then have a schema to tap during their creative process. Students can then be given a sample poem to discuss in small groups. (Three figures are included.) (MG)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED331093

Demetrice A. Worley
Department of English
Bradley University
Illinois Association of
Teachers of English Conference
October 26, 1990

# Freedom within Boundaries: The Use of Structured and Loose Structured Poetry

Often when we teach creative writing to grade school and middle school students, we encounter two problems: students state that they do not have anything to write about, or students keep their poetic "voices" quiet and imitate the examples that we give them. How do we encourage students to create poetry that is in a poetic form and is in their authentic voices? As a creative writing teacher, I have found when introducing third through eighth graders to poetry, if students are encouraged to mentally create images of poetic forms and to write poetry within "loose" versions of the forms, they are more receptive to poetry. The rules concerning writing in a form give students a lifeline to hold onto while they do the daring act of creating text out of thin air. In addition, when students visualize the forms before they write, they have a sense of where they are going before they get there.

When we think of forms, we think of sonnets, ballads, iambic pentameter, and rhyme schemes. When our students think of poetry they think of rhyme schemes and boredom. Some students do not

CS212810

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Demetrice Worley
BEST COPY AVAILABLE
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

think poetry can exist without a rhyme scheme. Whereas other students do not believe that poetry has any connection to them. Before discussing what I do in my classrooms with my students, I would like to briefly discuss what I believe goes wrong when we teach poetry.

**The "I Don't Understand"/"A Rocket in My Pocket" Poetry Blues**

When we introduce poetry to students, we seem to move in extremes--either we give them examples from the seventeenth century or we give them overly simplistic rhyming poetry. Both types of poetry can cause the students to experience cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, the seventeenth century poetry uses archaic language and concerns topics with which students have little interest. For example, before I became enlightened, I would give my students the following sonnet by John Milton:

On His Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?
I fondly ask. But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state
I kingly. thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait. (168)

This poem is a fine example of a sonnet, but even I have a hard time following it. Can we imagine the discomfort our students

feel when we ask them to explain poetry like this example? Or their discomfort when we ask them to write one like it?

On the other hand, the simplistic nature of some poetry, such as this one by Shel Silverstein is only as entertaining as its rhyme scheme:

ICKLE ME, PICKLE ME, TICKLE ME TOO

Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me too
Went for a ride in a flying shoe.
"Hooray!"
"What fun!"
"It's time we flew!"
Said Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me too.

Ickle was captain, and Pickle was crew
And Tickle served coffee and mulligan stew
As higher
And higher
And higher they flew,
Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me too.

Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me too,
Over the sun and beyond the blue.
"Hold on!"
"Stay in!"
"I hope we do!"
Cried Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me too.

Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me too
Never returned to the world they knew,
And nobody
Knows what's
Happened to
Dear Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me too. (16-17)

Even though this Silverstein poem is easier for students to understand than the Milton example, it is also problematic. After listening to just one class period of this type of poetry, some students can forget the purpose of poetry and become too concern with rhyme schemes. The following is a poem one of my

nine-year-old students wrote after listening to several of these types of poems:

Rocket in the pocket

My favorite toy is a rocket
because every time I turn around
it's in my pocket
and stuck in a socket.
So sometimes I pull it out the socket
and I put it in my pocket
and it sneas Haa Haa Choo
So I take my rocket
out my pocket and put
it back in the socket
and let it scream get me out
that socket right away.

(Please note that all of the student work which appears in this paper is printed exactly as the students created it.) When I asked this student what he thought of the poem that he had created, he stated "It's stupid. But I couldn't think of anything else." This student's frustration with his content and rhyme scheme is typical of what I encounter in my poetry workshops.

The two examples I have given are on extreme ends of the poetry spectrum, but I do believe that they represent what is presented to students as poetry. In order for students to see poetry as living, breathing words which have a connection to them, we need to give students examples that are from the middle of the poetry spectrum. In particular, I think we should find poetry forms in this middle ground. In my workshops I have found that students in the third through eighth grades respond best to quatrains and sonnets.

**Elementary Forms--Quatrains**

The Form

For my third through sixth grade students, I begin my introduction to poetry by introducing them to the stanza by way of the quatrain. The quatrain works well as an example to use to explain how stanzas can create a poem. Many students find the quatrain structure easy to remember. The quatrain's abcb rhyme scheme appears often in ballads, hymns, and popular songs (Wallace 126).

Visualizing

To help students understand how a poem is constructed, I explain that a stanza is like a floor or level in a house. Each floor is slightly different, no floor by itself makes the house, but all of the floors or levels together form the house. I ask them to look at a poem as a house which has as many rooms as they decide in order for it to be complete. This description works especially well with fourth through sixth graders. I explain also that the title of the poem is the roof of the house (see Figure 1). (Figure 1 is a representation of the overhead that I use in my discussion.)

Seeing a visual representation of the poetic form allows students to visualize what a poem looks like. Therefore, when they write their own poem they will have a schema to tap during their creative process.

Analyzing the Example

After discussing quatrains and giving students a visual representation of a poem, I give them a sample poem from the

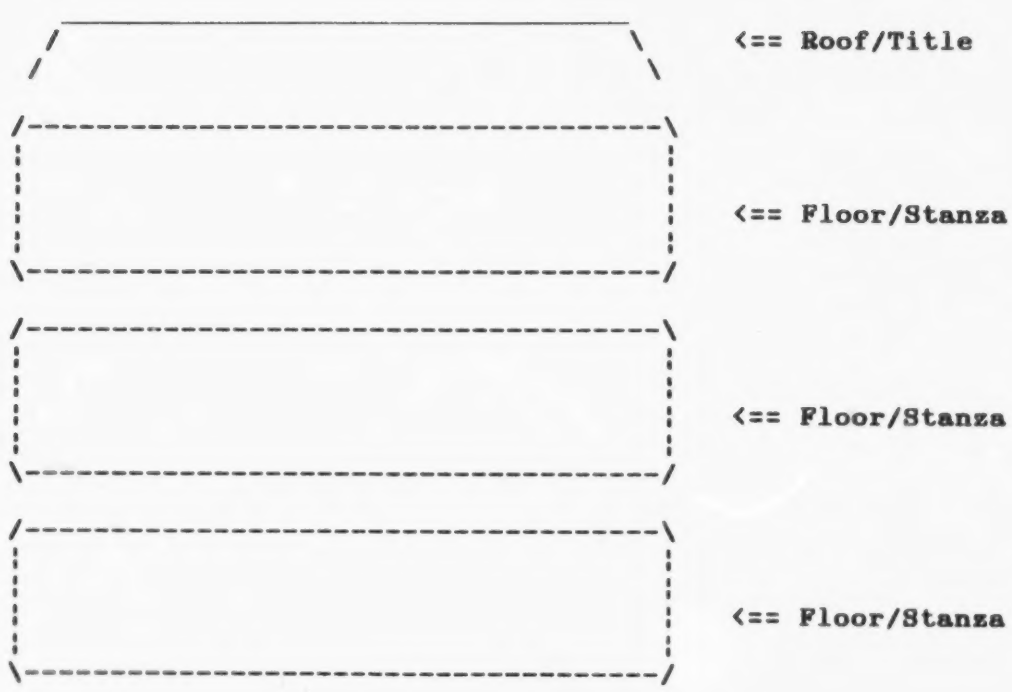


Figure 1. A Visual Representation of a Poem.

middle of the poetry continuum, place them into small groups, and ask them to discuss what the roof/title means and what the individual floors/stanzas mean. Then I ask them to discuss how the title/roof and stanzas/floors work together to make the poem house. The following poem by Robert Frost is one with which I have had positive results in my classrooms:

Gathering Leaves

Spades take up leaves
No better than spoons,
And bags full of leaves
Are light as balloons

I make a great noise
Of rustling all day
Like rabbit and deer
Running away.

But the mountains I raise
Elude my embrace,
Flowing over my arms
And into my face.

I may load and unload
Again and again.
Till I fill the whole shed,
And what have I then?

Next to nothing for weight;
And since they grew duller
From contact with earth,
Next to nothing for color.

Next to nothing for use.
But a crop is a crop,
And who's to say where
The a harvest shall stop? (234-235)

Since most of my students usually have experienced the joy of raking, piling, and jumping into or kicking autumn leaves, they have no problems following this poem. Some of them are surprised that an adult could write a poem about leaves which they can understand.

The following is a sample of poems created by eight- to thirteen-year-old students after a discussion about quatrains and small group work with the Frost poem:

The Moon and Stars

The moon is yellow the stars are blue
So lets have fun just me and you.
Off to the stars through the moon
I want you to know I'll see you soon.

My Dolls

When I play with my dolls
I wonder would they play with me too.
When I look in their eyes
I wonder when they come alive.

I love to hug my dolls
They make me feel happy inside.
They are clever
so are me.

When they smile at me
I smile back at my dolls.
When I think of them
They make me feel so surprise.

The following poems are ones which the students created that have a social message:

Peer Pressure

You think they're your friends.
They want you to join in.
But they'll pressure you to the end,
Because they don't want you with them.

They want you in DRUGS.
They want you in ALCOHOL
They don't want your hugs,
They don't' want you at all.

So stick to those who want you,
Those who listen.
Those who don't want you,
will never glisten.

Abuse

Don't abuse your kids
It's not right
don't blow your lid tonight

Listen to your children
Sometimes they are right
Don't abuse your kids
It's not right

Listen to me
PLEASE!

All of the students took their writing seriously and wrote about topics that were important to them. Also, they all used rhyme schemes to varying degrees, but notice the difference between these poetic voices and the voice you heard in "Rocket in my pocket."

**Complex Forms--Sonnets**

The Form

When most of us hear the word sonnet we think of Shakespeare, 14 lines, a turn, iambic pentameter, and a rhyme scheme. When our seventh and eighth grade students hear the word sonnet, a few might think of Shakespeare, but the majority of them will think of nothing. If we explain a sonnet only in respect to its formal elements, we will lose our students' interest in writing a sonnet because they will feel overwhelmed by all the rules they have to remember in order to create one. However, if we explain to our students that what goes on within the sonnet is as important as, or even more important than, its

formal elements, we can encourage students to see that the message (the words) within the sonnet are what is important. The form of the sonnet can then be used in the writing classroom as an effective tool for encouraging students to write poetry in their authentic voices.

In my workshops I begin by explaining that a sonnet is a fourteen line poem in which a problem/sense and statement are described and then a resolution is presented. I explain that in the Shakespearean style sonnet the writer takes twelve lines to describe the problem/sense and statement. Then the last two lines present the resolution. I explain also that in a Petrarchan sonnet the writer takes eight lines to present the problem/sense and then six lines to present the statement and resolution.

Visualizing

To aid the students in their understanding of the form of the sonnet, first, I give them them a visual form of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet (see Figures 2 and 3). (Figures 2 and 3 are representations of the overheads I use to illustrate the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan sonnet forms, respectively.)

This visual experience with the poetic form encourages students to see where the turn occurs in both types of sonnets. In addition, it serves as a scheme they can use when they write their own sonnets.

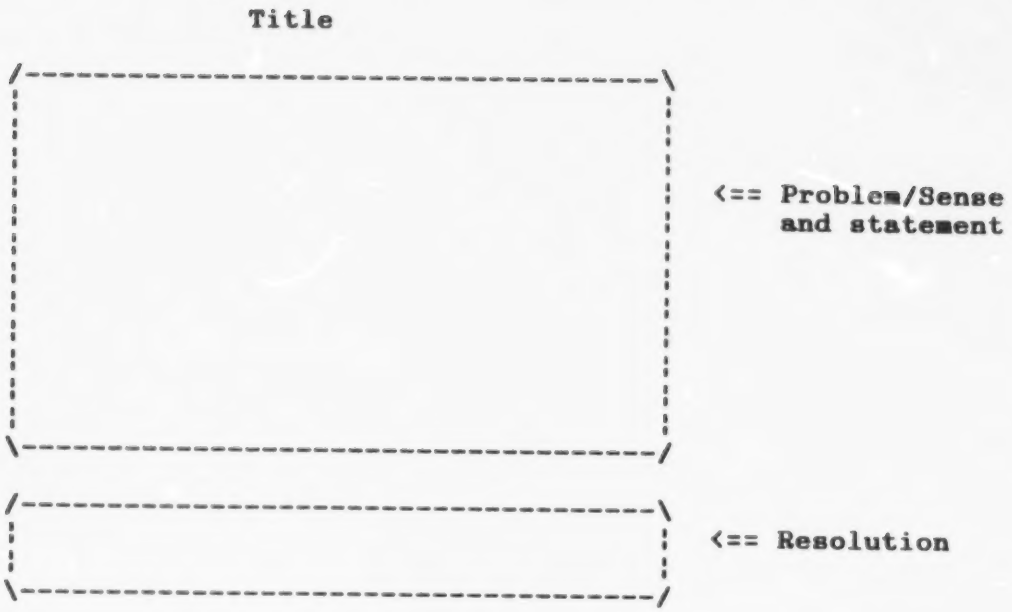


Figure 2. Visual Representation of a Shakespearean Sonnet.

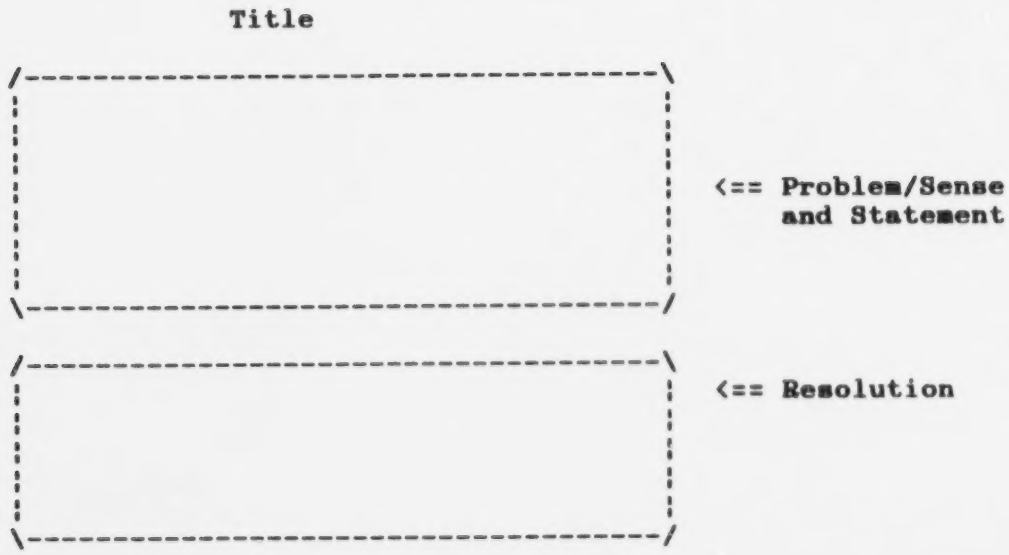


Figure 3. Visual Representation of a Petrarchan Sonnet.

Analyzing the Example

After we discuss the sonnet form, I give the students a sample poem from what I consider to be the middle of the poetry spectrum, place them in groups and have them decide whether the poem is a Shakespearean or a Petrarchan sonnet and to identify the problem/scene, statement, and resolution. For example, I have used Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus" in my classes:

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose fame
Is the imprisoned lightening, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (28)

My students enjoy this sonnet. Many of them recognize it as the poem that appears on the base of the Statue of Liberty. They are able to understand and relate to the language and the message of the poem. The students are able also to identify the "The New Colossus" as a Petrarchan sonnet.

After the small group work and a large group discussion, I ask the students to think about a problem or scene. I ask them to close their eyes and mentally see the problem or scene. Then I ask them to write down what they saw. Next, I have them look at the two sonnet forms and choose the one they want to use to create their imagined problem or scene. I remind them to keep

poems. I do not ask them to write in iambic pentameter or to keep a rhyme scheme. The following are examples of "loose sonnets" which were written by two twelve-year-old students:

A Walk Through the Woods

As I walk my dog through
the woods
He growls like a lion, at
every sound.
He races ahead of me as
an animal to the kill.
And finds out it is just
a leaf blowing across
the ground.
He whimpers and whines
like a baby to find we
must go home.
And slowly falls asleep on
his pillow as if nothing ever happened.

Arthritis Nights

I hear you crying during the night.
Worried what is it you are screaming for,
I check. Your door creaks open and I
peek in. Your tear stained face looks
up at me in surprise. Your angel like
face is pained like a wounded animal.
Your hands stiffly shelter your sore knee.
I come close to comfort you and take away
the pain. I bring you a tube filled
with water for you to use to relieve
some of the pain. You do not fight it
as I place it under your knee.
You give me a hug and I return
to darkness and silence.

As these two examples illustrates, young students can write in loose sonnet forms. In both of these examples, the students chose to write loose Petrarchan sonnets.

## Conclusions

The poetic forms discussed in this paper gave my students more than just a container for their thoughts--the forms acted as "lifelines." These "lifelines" gave the students support as they attempted to create something out of nothing. All of the poetry is on topics which are of concern to middle school students. And more importantly, the poetic voices which sing-out loud and clear in the poetry are the students' authentic voices.

## Works Cited

Frost, Robert. "Gathering Leaves." The Poetry of Robert Frost. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Holt, 1969. 234-35.

Lazarus, Emma. "The New Colossus." The Heath Anthology of American Literature. Ed. Paul Lauter et al. 2 vols. Lexington, MA: Heath, 1990. 2: 28.

Milton, John. "On His Blindness." John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1957.

Silverstein, Shel. "Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me Too." Where the Sidewalk Ends. New York: Harper, 1974. 16-17.

Wallace, Robert. Writing Poems. Glenview, IL: Scott, 1987.